# [Better a Tent than a Mortgage]

[No.1?] [?]

Approximately 3,500 words [??] SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: BETTER A TENT THAN A MORTGAGE

Date of First Writing February 28, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed W. D. Strange (white)

Fictitious Name Walter Strother

Street Address None

Place Route 1, Lykesland, S. C.

Occupation Farmer

Name of Writer L. E. Cogburn

Name of Reviser State Office

The cold February wind swept across the fields and through the wide open spaces. Only here and there could a tree be seen; for the woods long ago had given place to broad cottonfields. This was eight miles east of Columbia, South Carolina, off the Leesburg road. I had made a trip especially for the purpose of gaining an interview with Mr. Walter Strother, to gather facts for his life story.

There was no indication of life about the place. No smoke was coming from the chimney, which is almost a sure sign on a cold day like this that no one was at home. [No. 10. S. C. B.V.L.?]

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I didn't want to miss seeing Mr. Strother. I knocked at the front entrance of his three-room log cottage. He opened the door, gazing for a moment in wonderment. Then, extending a rough toil-worn hand, he said: “You'd better step inside out of this cold wind.”

“I don't believe you remember me, Mr. Strother,” I remarked, as I stepped into the hallway.

He replied: “Yes, let me see. It was about three years ago that you were here and advised me about my terracing.”

“You have a good memory, Mr. Strother. Did the changes in the terraces I suggested remedy the soil washing?”

“I had no more breaks. I have just finished with my annual work with terraces.”

Opening the door of the combination living room and bedroom, Mr. Strother invited me to enter and have a seat. Then he said: “I had just come in and started to build a fire. There hasn't been any made since early this morning. I'll have to go get some more wood.”

The few minutes he was out, I observed the room and its furnishings. In one corner stood a new mahogany-finished, four-poster bed, neatly spread with a purple counterpane. By the small front window was a sewing machine, and under the window by the fireplace set a box for wood. Against the north wall stood a dresser, and in a corner a small table. A rocker and several straight chairs circled in front of the fireplace. A bright-colored, new linoleum square covered most of the floor. The walls were ceiled with undressed pine boards, which were partly covered with large sections of cardboard. The hewn four-by-six joists were plainly visible.

They were, however, covered with boards laid crosswise on top of them.

My host, having built a good fire, said; “Draw up the rocker and have a seat here near me.”

“Mr. Strother, I decided this would be a splendid day for finding you at home. I wanted so much to talk to you again that I braved this wind in order to have just such a luxury as this good wood fire and rocking chair while we talked. You see, I am sort of a writing fellow, and I want to write something about your life. I know you must have some very interesting things to tell me.”

Leaning forward, with his finger tips pressing on his brow, Walter Strother began:

“I was born on the Wateree River fifty years ago, and lived there until I was six years old. My father then moved to Derrick's Pond, about seventeen miles southeast of Columbia. The next year, when I was just seven years old, my father left us. I am the oldest of his family of seven children.

“In order to help my mother support our family, I had to plow in the fields at the age of eight years. I became a regular plowhand by the time I was ten. Mr. [Kerningham?], on whose place we lived, hired me by the day, at a wage of forty cents a day. We earned so little that my mother could afford to buy only the bare necessities. There were days that we had to go hungry. I, in the meantime, had received but a few months of schooling. I didn't have time to go to school. I had to work.

“When I was twelve years old, and my brothers were large enough to helps I asked Mr. Kerningham to let us work a sharecrop. I felt that this 4 would afford us more to eat, because of an advance on a sharecrop.

“I'll never forget the morning I went to Mr. Kerningham and asked him for a sharecrop. He was fixing to go to Columbia. Already had his horse hitched to the buggy. He said to me,

'Son, you can't manage a farm.' I looked at him square in the face and said, 'Give me a chance.' He told me he would think it over, and for me to come back in a few days. I didn't wait. I went back the next day, and he said, 'Walter, I have decided to do it. When do you want to move?' 'Right away,' I told him. 'Go and catch Kit and Beck and hitch them to the wagon and move,' he told me.

“That year, I made seven bales of cotton and plenty of corn, peas, and potatoes. And we didn't have to go hungry at any time.

“Mr. Kerningham used the lien system to run his farm. He traded with M.E.C. Shull, who ran a big grocery store in Columbia on Main Street, between Taylor and Blanding.

“That fall, after we started to pick cotton, I went to Mr. Kerningham and said, 'I have a bale of cotton out.'

“'You know you haven't a bale already,' he replied.

“'Yes, I have, too.'

“'When do you want to gin it? It's bringing a little more than eight cents now.'

“'I'll do as you say. You know best.'

“'Suppose you gin it tomorrow,' he said.

“He had a gin on the place, and the next day I had it ginned. I went to Mr. Kerningham and said, 'I want you to sell it for me.'

“'No, you take the wagon and haul it to Columbia and sell. I'll meet you at the store.'

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“I tied my mules to the hitching post on Assembly Street. I remembered how my father did when he sold cotton. I cut the side of each bale and pulled a sample and took it to the

buyer and asked him what he would bid on it. Taking the samples and examining theme he said, 'I'll give you eight cents. Might give you more after I see the bales. Where are they?' We went to the wagon, and he pulled a sample from each bale. After examining it, he said: 'I'll give you eight and a half, if you'll sell it now and not try to get a higher bidder.'

“I sold it to him and took the check to the store and met Mr. Kerningham. He said to me, 'Have you sold your cotton?'

“'Yes, sir, I replied. And at the same time I handed him the check.

“'What did you get for it?' he asked.

“'Eight and a half cents a pound.'

“'That's good.'

“We walked to the back end of the store. He sat down on a bag of oats, and I sat on, — I don't remember what. I didn't know much 'rithmetic, but I had already counted up what was to come to me. He was dividing it up, after taking off the cost of bagging and ties and ginning. He said to me, 'You have so-and-so for your part. How much do you want?'

“'Not a dime.'

“'You don't want any at all?'

“'No, sir. Put it to my credit on my account,' I told him.

“I furnished the labor and paid for half the fertilizer, and he furnished and fed the stock and paid for half the fertilizer. We divided everything that was made half-and-half, except the potatoes. I had all of these that I made.

“I worked this way two years with Mr. Kerningham. Saw that he was getting the best of it, as I thought then. But there wasn't the slightest misunderstanding between us.

“The next year, I moved away from him and rented. I bought a plug mule and got one of those liens. Had a bad crop year, and didn't make enough to pay the rent and lien. I took the mule back to the man I bought it from. He didn't have to come for it. I explained to him that I had nothing to pay, and he was mighty nice about it. Took the mule back and didn't blame me.

“I sold everything to settle up and was left flat again, like the first time I went to the old man.

“I found out that I made a mistake when I left Mr. Kerningham. I went back and asked him for a crop again, and he gave it to me. I was a pretty big boy then, whole lot of difference from the first time.

“This year I made a good crop, got a fair price for it, and cleared a little money. I was determined to do something.

“By this times my brothers and sisters had left us. There was no one at home now but Mother and myself.

“Old Mrs. Rast had been to see me about renting her place and coming to live in the house with her. She was living alone in a large house and wanted a family, without children, for company.

“I went to Mr. Kerningham and told him I was thinking of renting Mrs. Rast's place, and asked him to watch me and see how I came along with it.

“I bought another mule, and paid for it this time. I had plenty of corn, forage, and meat to carry me through the year.

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“'I rented from Mrs. Rast and stayed there thirteen years. We got along fine living in the house with her. We thought a lot of her, and she liked us.

“Times were better now, and it did not take much for my mother and me to live on. I saved a little money every year after my obligations were met. I sold my old plug mule and bought a better one, so I could work more acres.

“My sisters, five of them, were all married and raising families. They were constantly sending for Mama to stay with them weeks at a time. When she was away, I had double duty. I'd come in at night too tired to have to fry eggs and make coffee. But it was up to me to cook supper or go to bed hungry. I got awful tired of baching it, and, besides, I didn't have time to cook any vegetables for dinner. So I had indigestion and got as cross as an old settin' hen.

“Well, the only thing I had to do was to find me a cook, but where? It seemed to me all the good ones were married or cooking for somebody else, or they were so old and ugly I didn't want to have to look at them across the table three times every day. But about this time, Mr. Altman, of Columbia, bought a little place over there right next to mine. He gave one of his sons a mule and put him to farming. His sister would come out every now and then to keep house for him. It would fall to my lot to take her back home occasionally. That thing happened for two years. And then one day, when I was taking her home, I told her I knew how good she was to her brother, and I knew she would be good to me. She laughed and said that she didn't know about that. But I wasn't going to be outdone, so I wrote her a letter, telling her how much I loved her and needed her. And the next 8 week, she wrote and said she had thought it over seriously and had decided to accept my proposal and become my wife. I tell you I was glad. So we decided on the day, and I took her over to the preacher, got the knot tied, and brought her home with me.

“I had always wanted a home of my own. I began to figure on the rent I was paying. During the thirteen years I was renting, I had paid fifty dollars an acre and hadn't a home yet.

“This was in 1918, when everything was at the peak. Land was away up. In the meantime, Mrs. Rast had died, and her place was for sale. I wanted to buy it, but the heirs wanted cash payment. I didn't have enough to pay all down.

“I looked around and investigated several places, and this one I am living on now was the beat I could get. I bought it and made the first payment twenty-one years ago. By working hard and saving, doing without things we would have enjoyed, I finished paying for it in five years.

“Right here I raised my family of four boys and one girl. One boy is in the ninth grade of high school now. The others finished high school. I was not able to send any of them to college. One of the boys is at Knoxville, Tennessee, with the Boone Transfer Company. Another one is manager of the A & P Store at Kingstree, South Carolina. He is married and visits us every few weeks. The other boy has been working but hasn't a job at present. He thinks he will have one soon. The girl is in training at the State Hospital.

“It would be hard to estimate the cost of medicine, doctors' bills, and hospital bills I have had in raising my family.

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“The boy that's in high school now was taken ill suddenly about four years ago. He fell unconscious on the floor out there in the hall. When I got to him, he was as limp as a rag. We took him to a country doctor, being the quickest one I could reach. He examined him and said he didn't know what was the matter with him, but told me to carry him to the hospital at once.

“After the examination at the hospital, I was told that he had infantile paralysis. They worked with him for days and days, and he became weaker and weaker. His breathing and

pulse were low. One night there were several doctors around his bed looking down at him. I was standing out in the hall and could see them through the partly closed door. I knew the situation; they didn't have to tell me. But I asked my doctor as he came out: 'Doctor, how is my boy?'

“He said, 'He can't live through the night.'

“I said, 'Doctor, will it be throwing any fat in the fire for me to get another doctor?'

“'We shall gladly welcome any help from any source. We have done all we can do,' was his reply.

“I called Dr. Snow and explained the situation. In a short time he was with my boy, and the first thing he did for him was to put a cold pack on his head. It wasn't long before he was breathing better, and by morning he seemed to be coming back. The doctor told me now he thought the boy would live, but one side of his body was dead,” indicating, with a stroke of his hand, from his nose down the middle of his body.

“After they kept him at the hospital for nearly three months, we brought him home. His mind was gone, and he had very little use of himself.

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We cared for him the best we could, rubbing and bathing him, and gradually he improved. Now he is passing his work at school. His body is normal, except he can't use his right hand.

“I don't believe we would have him with us today had it not been for the treatment he got at the hospital. But I can't help but feel they were a little hard on me in charging. I've paid most of the bill, the best I've been able to do.

“I am not a Christian nor a member of the church. I know I haven't lived as I should have. But I go to church and Sunday School and pay my preacher. I treat my fellowman right.”

“Didn't you lose a boy at school when the tornado —-?” Noticing his countenance, that he was profoundly moved, I said, “Pardon me, please, I shouldn't have mentioned it.”

Weeping and suppressing his sobs, he pulled himself together, saying: “I didn't want to remember it. That was the worst thing I've ever had to happen to me. Word came to me of the wreck of the school building. I went over there and pulled my boy out from under the building....” Hesitatingly and sorrowfully, he continued: “All the other children, I was able to do something for.” After a lapse of about ten seconds: “That, I believe, was about fifteen years ago.”

“I know it must have been hard for you, but it takes such grit and courage as you have to overcome it,” I remarked, hoping to give him some encouragement.

Now, having gained complete control of his emotions, he reverted his attention, saying: “I'm up in the morning at five, and I go all day, working till late. Since the W.P.A. has been operating, labor has been so high that I couldn't afford to hire any help with the farm work, and I've been 11 doing it myself.

“My wife has been working in the sewing room of the W.P.A., off and on, mostly off. Sometime ago, they told her that since we own our farm she would have to quit. I am not sorry of it either, for she would work over there until she'd make herself sick, and I would have to carry her to the doctor. As it is now, she is of more help to me.

“This place has some more than a hundred acres. I don't try to run more than a one-horse farm. Last year I planted seven acres in cotton and made only one bale. I used poison, too. But the boll weevil eat up the cotton in spite of it. The fertilizer cost me one hundred dollars. I sold the cotton for fifty-two dollars. The loss on the fertilizer alone was forty-eight dollars, not counting the work and the other expense. I had to sell something else to finish

paying for the fertilizer. I am through with cotton. It costs around eight and nine cents to raise it. It would have paid me far better to have planted potatoes, even if I hadn't made but two bushels, that would've been clear.

“I made plenty of corn and forage and two banks of potatoes, about seventy-five bushels. I plant velvet beans in the corn. That is fine for building up land and good for stock. I don't have to gather it, just let it stay in the field and turn the stock in on it. The longer it stays, the better they like it.

“We raise our own meat and flour. I always try to keep a good milk cow, and we have plenty of milk and butter. We have a hundred white leghorn and barred rock hens. We sell the eggs and have all the chickens and eggs we want for our own use.

“We've never had but one case in court, and that was in the magistrate's 12 court. I wasn't twelve years old.

“We had a day out picking cotton for a neighbor. We started picking on one end of a large fields with rows seven or eight acres long. We were picking along near the middle of the length of the rows, before I had noticed a crowd picking from the other end and meeting us. One of the boys stood up and hollered out: 'If Walter Strother is here, you'd better watch your pile or you won't have any cotton.' When he said that, I pulled off my cotton sack and ran toward him. And he was coming for me. He was fully as large as I was, and we would've been well matched for a good tussle. But when I got near him, a big shining blade of a knife in his hand caught my eye. I hesitated just a second, and then I kicked him and hit him with my fist at the same time, knocking him down. I jumped on top of him, took his knife away from him, shut it up and put it in my pocket. Then I gave him a good beating.

“At the trial, two days afterwards, he had a big knot on the back of his neck. The boy's father had me tried for assault and battery. After the boy had testified, the judge said: 'Now, Strother, let's have your side of it.' I told him how it took place, and he asked me:

“Have you got that knife in your pocket?' I answered, 'Yes, sir,' and handed it to him. He took it and, holding it up, asked the boy, 'Is this your knife?'

“'Yes sir,' the boy told the judge.

“'Tell me why Strother has it.'

“Hesitating somewhat, he said: 'He took it away from me.'

“Then the Judge turned to the boy's father and said: 'I think you have the boot on the wrong foot.'”

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“I know I've made it hard for myself. That old truck out there in the yard is what we use when we go anywhere. It takes just as much, if not more, gas and oil than a new car would use. I could go to Columbia today and drive home a new car. Buy it on credit, too. I believe I could go to Mr. Kerningham any time I wish and borrow $1,000 in cash. And he'd more than likely have that much on hand. If he didn't, he'd write me a check.

“We'd like very much to build us a now house to live in, but I'll stay on in this one. And, if necessary, I'll buy me a tent and put it up out there in the yard before I'd give a mortgage on my home to get the money. I could sell a calf and buy a tent to live in.

“Hesitating, and apparently serious, as if weighing a matter of great importance, he said: “I don't know what might happen. Of course, I'm not counting on dying soon, but you know a man of my age is more likely to die than when I was much younger.

“I want to leave this place for my children, when my wife and I are gone. I want to fix the title so that they can't sell it and run through with the money and not have a home to go to. I know what it means to not have a home.